

Martin Luther: Reformer, Hymnist

A Homily

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Church of Our Saviour (Episcopal)

Mill Valley, CA USA

Wednesday Eucharist, 10:30 a.m.

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Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 1994

Isaiah 55: 6-11

John 15: 1-11

Psalm 46

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Our readings today are rich, and so is the life of Martin Luther. This remarkable and great man of history did, as God's instrument, reform the Christian Church throughout the world. Who does not know the name? Those of the Christian faith, certainly do.

If you come away with any good news from this Homily, let it be that God works in history. That Martin Luther, a man of God, was a man of God in history. That God still speaks. He speaks to us in many ways. As Luther so ardently said 500 years ago, the Bible speaks to us. As we know, the Holy Spirit is a guide.

Martin Luther, man of history, was a writer of hymns, famous for music that we sing today. He is a reminder of a Christ-inspired, a Christ-filled life, and a Christ-gifted man of faith. His most notable and memorable hymn is, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Here is a part of the hymn played for us. (Some of the hymn is played on a musical instrument, no voice.)

These are some words from the hymn:

"A mighty fortress is our God

A bulwark never failing;

Our helper He amid the flood

Of mortal ills prevailing.

For still our ancient foe

Doth seek to work us woe –

His craft and power are great,

And, armed with cruel hate,

On earth is not his equal."

One commentary says: "Luther's hymn was sung boldly as an affirmation of God's power over forces that sought to disrupt the truth of God."

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483, at Eisleben, Germany. He studied at Mansfeld, Magdeburg and Eisenach, Germany. At the age of 18, he entered the University of Erfurt intending a career in law. But dropped out almost immediately, believing that law represented uncertainty. Almost at the same time he received his Master's degree, he became a monk. This was 1505. He had entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt to prepare for the priesthood.

He was appointed professor at the University of Wittenberg in 1508. After his ordination, he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity and attracted large congregations by his preaching.

In 1511 he visited Rome, became critical over the corruptions in the church and agonized over the problem of salvation--that it was not won by indulgences, but was a gift of God's grace.

On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his 95 theses of denunciation in Wittenberg with a view to begin a public debate. This started a quarrel between Luther and the church.

These are the first three theses:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.

During 1521, Luther maintained his stand before the Diet of Worms that led to his excommunication. German princes and followers among

churchmen and the people supported him. At this time he began translating the Bible into German. He completed the whole translation in 1531.

The translation of the Bible into German, invention of the printing press, and hymn writing all brought the spirit of God to common men, gave Martin Luther, the great preacher, another venue that moved the Christian world towards the new way--Protestantism.

History of man and of creation, which means our earth and the universe, is God's field. He acts so greatly. Yet God acts with and in mankind. He as friendly maker brought so much to one man, Martin Luther, who in Christ remarkably added and was an instrument of movement in human life. So we know that Christ acts in man, for in our reading today from John, the reading offers: "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit...*" Martin Luther did this in accord with his understanding of the Bible. He was a prophet.

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish Calvinist and Essayist of the 19th Century, says:

As a participant and dispenser of divine influence, he shows himself among human affairs a true connecting medium and visible messenger between heaven and earth, a man, therefore, not only permitted to enter the sphere of poetry, but to dwell in the purest centre thereof, perhaps the most inspired of all teachers since the Apostles.

Martin Luther's teachings went this way, as Luther the reformer had become Luther the revolutionary:

- The Bible is the only source of faith; it contains the inspiration of God.
- Faith *alone* can work justification; man is saved by confidently believing that God will pardon him. This faith not only includes a full pardon of sin, but also an unconditional release from its penalties.
- The hierarchy and priesthood are not Divinely instituted or necessary, and ceremonial or exterior worship is not essential or useful. Ecclesiastical vestments, pilgrimages, mortifications, monastic vows, prayers for the dead, intercession of saints, avail the soul nothing.
- All sacraments, with the exception of baptism, Holy Eucharist, and penance, are rejected. A powerful theological concept and attitude, Luther's influence of reformation remains with Protestants and Catholics today. The Reformation is an ongoing movement, even this more than 500 years later. The Anglican Church, with its middle way of Protestant/catholicism, emphasizes in focus the sacraments of baptism and Holy Eucharist. In the case of Eucharist, since the Anglican of today and since 1979 has emphasized it (in specific, the Protestant Episcopal Church USA)—Holy Eucharist every week! Baptism as a celebration and

important emphasis for the “Priesthood of All Believers,” as well! No wonder we have a Feast day celebrating Martin Luther in our Church lives.

- The priesthood is universal; every Christian may assume it. A body of specially trained and ordained men to dispense the mysteries of God is needless and a usurpation.
- There is no visible Church or one specially established by God whereby men may work out their salvation.

Whether you believe all or part of Martin Luther’s statements, his influence and thought, his ideas and faith, his life of believing changed the world.

We remember Martin Luther in hymn. He always wrote the words, sometimes the music itself, and often took the music from popular songs of his day. His most well known hymns:

- Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice
- Saviour of the Nations, Come
- From Heaven Above to Earth I Come
- Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands
- Come, Spirit of God, Holy Lord
- Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word

God in history is enacted by the story of Martin Luther, as are his hymns.

Amen.